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Liturgical Choral Contributions of J. S. Bach: Issues and Lessons for Present Day Transformative Church Music Ministry in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: This paper, Liturgical Choral Contributions of J. S. Back: Issues and Lessons for Present Day Transformative Church Music Ministry in Nigeria, characterises Bach's liturgical music ministry at the St Thomas Kirche, Leipzig, for 27 years as a model for the essentially unfaithful, common and routine church music practice in many Nigerian churches, especially regarding the composition of liturgical music or the issue of finding appropriate music repertoire aligned with Scripture. Given his day's religious and cultural climate, it takes a cursory look at his music ministry's fidelity to Scriptural narratives, church traditional and theological standpoints, and values, showing music as a liturgical educator and a reflector of reality and hope, among others—as a Bible narrator. The paper calls on church leaders to provide for music ministries in their churches and make it possible to infuse music in worship with the necessary biblically inclined language to impact faith and held beliefs.

Keywords: *Liturgical Music, Choral, J. S. Bach, Transformative, Church Music*

INTRODUCTION

The church and its liturgy are fundamental to believers for inspiration in life and to enhance devotion and character formation. Any style of Church music, of necessity, exists for

the liturgy, given that it is for the church's worship expression. Also, it provides education and development for the church's support in worship. Church musicians often encounter challenges regarding new directions for creating and using music in the liturgy. Often, as composers developed church music in African churches, they could not but cast their eyes on European models both for the science and practice of the art and in connection with worship, more so, especially in Germany, a place of Martin Luther's reformation and a precursor for the evangelical roots.

From this tradition comes Johann Sebastian Bach, a German Composer, Organist and Cantor, who brought church music ministry to a place of emphasis through his 27 years of service at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig (Kavanaugh, 1996: 18-19). His vast experience and choral repertoire supporting the Lutheran church liturgy runs into multiple circles of the Lutheran liturgical calendar (Grout and Palisca, 1996: 403, 407; Wolf, 1991: 30, 39-40). African contemporary church musicians could explore this profound heritage of Lutheran church music in many forms to develop a commitment to liturgical motifs. Although Bach's choral treatments of these forms, including the Cantatas, Oratorios, Passions, and Mass settings, have continued to attract study interest, not much of these have been seen for their liturgical impact. This study considers the liturgical significance of Bach's choral contributions.

Ironically, the church music ministry in Nigeria has not sufficiently enjoyed the desired institutional attention and development it requires. This situation poses tremendous and diverse challenges to those called to pursue a career as music ministers in the church. A primary concern is where and how music plays important roles through adherence to the church's doctrine, theology, and sacred character. No one seems to understand the difficulties the church musicians have faced to evolve creativity, dedication, organisation of personnel and materials for the service of choral engineering in the church's liturgy. All that people want to hear and see is that the choir performs music in the church.

Regrettably, some church musicians seem not to have handled the challenges of dealing with complex church institutions such as the church council and situational problems on the job correctly. Some have had to resign their positions, while others abandoned their duty posts. The worship music reflects inadequacies bordering

contextual, moral and musical failures and experiences in the churches. For most climes, church music in terms of compositions or performances does not seem to reflect the mood and character of their texts or biblical contexts and, by extension, does not enhance worship expressions or proclamation of their message to the world.

The character of Bach's choral compositions tends to present a potent antidote for this apparent betrayal of intent. Consequently, this paper will draw attention to the liturgical choral contributions of J. S. Bach to Lutheran liturgy and show inherent lessons for contemporary church music composers in Nigeria. The paper will highlight the peculiar needs of the church music ministry in Nigeria and identify the uses of church music for liturgical and missional purposes. Also, it will itemise the relevant issues and draw appropriate lessons in the liturgical choral works of J. S. Bach.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH MUSIC AND THE LITURGY IN BACH'S CHORAL MUSIC

The word liturgy stems from the Greek, *Leitourgia* combining two concepts: '*leit'* (people) and '*ergon'* (work) to mean minister. In this case, 'people's work' refers to working for God. It often describes ways of corporate worship. *Leitourgia*, according to Barry Liesch (2001:171), has to do with ministering, service or the act of worship and is used concerning formal priestly service or ministry. Also, liturgy, in the words of Wolterstorff (2005:10), includes every action of proclamation and worship. Therefore, liturgy is the entire structure, content and means of worship in the Christian church for which music acts as a pivot. This role in worship is the emollient that gives smooth expressions to the mood of worship.

The liturgical choral music serves the work and mission of the church and her expressions of the faith. The scriptural content, prayers, witness, and musical expressions interwove with the devotional offering of the people in worship. Notable liturgical music is the German hymn genre named, chorale, and developed from the reformation era led by Martin Luther. He wrote many, including '*Ein Feste Burg*' or A Mighty Fortress Is Our God (Grout and Palisca, 240), were to bring the people into the liturgy as active participants. Liturgical music is music used in corporate worship

(Joncas, 2005:48). However, given his liturgical music repertoire, J. S. Bach tended to promote a robust musical culture for congregational and choir engagements in worship during his time at Leipzig. Consequently, there is a need to highlight seven of these choral and congregational chorales in this work. However, a brief survey of the person of J. S. Bach and his ministry of choral engineering is necessary.

OVERVIEW OF J. S. BACH'S CHORAL MINISTRY

Johann Sebastian Bach, born on March 21, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany, was the youngest of eight children of Johann Ambrosius, a descendant of Veit Bach who died in 1619, J. S. Bach thought himself to be a Hungarian because his great grandfather had migrated from there due to persecution resulting from his Lutheran Christianity. He was a religious man, a practising Lutheran with a library containing many ecclesiastical works (Schonberg, 1970:16-17).

Bach was 5 feet 7 ½ inches tall, possessing a muscular physique and a solid body. At nine, his parents died early, and he moved in with his eldest brother, Johann Christoph. His children numbered 20 from two marriages. He was essentially self-taught but had received some violin instructions from his father. Some of his most significant musical works include the B minor Mass and the St Matthew Passion, a musical setting of the passion of Christ leading to Easter. Bach is on record to have invented the well-tempered scale, which is today in use with the octave divided into twelve equal tones making it possible to modulate from one key to another. He died in 1750 (Ibid).

This musical liturgist strikes a chord in Western music education and consequently enjoys considerable attention in large dimensions of scholarship. It will be near impossible to exhaust every dimension of Bach's Literature. Many of these study Bach's musical intelligence and his German baroque era. Apart from the broader sense of Western attributes and techniques, more specifically are attributes relating to his melodic intricacies, ingenious contrapuntal methods, the thorough-bass feature, and the ever-emerging musical world (Kavanaugh, 1996:p?). There seems only a little inquiry on his choral career in the service of the church's liturgy, and these quests are usually not for their liturgical significance. The aspect of music for the

liturgy happened to be the centrepiece of J. S. Bach's glorious musical career. Edward Dickson (1969:283) puts it thus:

> In viewing him exclusively as a composer for the church, however, we shall see by far the most considerable part of him, for his secular compositions, remarkable as they are, always appear rather as digressions from the main business of his life. His conscious life–long purpose was to enrich the musical treasury of the church he loved, to strengthen and signalise every feature of her worship which his genius could reach; and to this lofty aim, he devoted an intellectual force and an energy of loyal enthusiasm unsurpassed in the annals of art.

The enormous world of J.S. Bach as a church musician, especially at Saint Thomaskirche (St. Thomas Church) and environs for a considerable career, cannot be exploited exhaustively for its liturgical significance in this paper. Suffice it to say that Bach sought to pursue selfless service with loyal enthusiasm for the Lutheran liturgy. Also, Grout and Palisca's adaptation of Bach's picture of the liturgy in St. Thomas, where he served, reflected an essentially singing (musical) worship (1996:416).

Choral Repertoire:

Bach's choral music functions as a sustainer, enhancer and edifier of the liturgical community. His compositional intent is to meet liturgical needs only. Accordingly, Bach's (Boyd, 2000: 122-141, Wolf and Emery, 2001:22-26), collections include seven of his cantatas composed and performed in the liturgy of the Annunciation, March 25. 1725; Easter Monday, April 2, 1725; St Michael, September 29, 1726; 10th Sunday after Trinity, August 1, 1723; 24th Sunday after Trinity, November 7, 1723; and Epiphany, January 6, 1724, respectively, as follows:

1. *Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern*
2. *Bleib bei uns, den es will Abend warden*
3. *Es erhub sich ein Streit*
4. *Schauet doch und sehet, ob irgend ein schmerz sei*
5. *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*
6. *Sie Werden aus Saba Alle Kommen*
7. *Gott, der Herr, ist Sonn 'und Schild*

Much of Bach's strength stems from his heavy use of the Lutheran traditional hymns from which the German chorale developed. Henry Lang (1941:393) notes that "the massive strength that characterises German baroque music, its somewhat ponderous and measured nature is due to the use of the Lutheran hymns, which form an integral part of music, reaching final glorification in the chorale cantatas of J. S. Bach." These cantatas are also the most significant base of Bach's liturgical music, given that general categorisation tends to function as strings of songs along with subject or liturgical season lines. As Lang (1941:498) puts it, "Christmas Oratorio is simply a string of cantatas, while the Passions carry the cantata, Protestant church music, to its ultimate height…the B minor Mass is still a gigantic collection of cantatas." It means that without implying non-creative freedom, Bach's compositional regime points to strict adherence to scriptural and traditional norms.

Also, these music compositions imply that contemporary composers need a composite look at the hymnals' rich theological, doctrinal and biblio-cultural heritage, as outlined by various church traditions. Perhaps a review of the text and music sources to expand the context of the truth and the mood they reflect will make much difference. More so, church music impacts or expands biblical narratives and, in the process, promotes the church's doctrines. If music serves the church's worship and certain liturgical expectations drive it, it presupposes that it carries biblical, theological and spiritual importance necessary for sound Christian character formation. Like it was for Bach, it can impact church services. However, the perennial challenge is church leaders relegating church music funding and development to the least of church needs. Attempts to circumvent this problem have only resulted in specific compositional patterns, especially in Nigeria. The writer reflects on a few of these patterns below.

ISSUES AND COMPOSITIONAL TRENDS IN PRESENT DAY NIGERIAN CHURCH MUSIC

Pay Per Service Music Ministry (P.P.S.): Some years ago, a glimpse of structured career-based church music ministry surfaced in Nigeria. Nevertheless, these are mostly limited to service and instant payments for service rendered or a pay-per-service (P.P.S.) music ministry. This P.P.S. or resort volunteer music system only

shows a general lack of awareness regarding the vast importance a Bible-driven church music ministry serves. Also, given the now waning volunteer system of musical service in the churches, many Christian worship centres find it difficult to source musicians due to a lack of career standards. That is, structured job descriptions, remuneration and calved-out liturgical expectation for the work.

A disadvantage of this system is an apparent artificial commitment. Sunday Inuga, the Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Erho-Abraka, whose church has experienced the P.P.S., observes that it is a model highly dependent on the level of incentives a church can give the service provider, thus implying that commitment to the ministry will be proportionate to the encouragement given the guest musician. Besides, it will enhance the pressure to impress rather than serve liturgical exigencies. This burden is traceable from the choice of music performed, primarily borrowed from awkward sources. The resultant offshoot of this faulty evaluation of music-making for the church shows that church authorities, church musicians and people foist with roles to make music a virile mechanism for attaining Christian goals can only be seen going through routines without necessarily making an impact.

Recycling Music Ministry (R.M.M.): This resultant model of church music is the act of borrowing music practices and repertoire from neighbouring churches and gospel artists and celebrities for worship. It also includes repeating a piece of particular music over time and excessively for lack of access to new experiences. While it followed the popular trends for a while, it soon became overworked worship music. Due to excessive repetition, it is possible to have lyrics that betray their use in the church context. The nineteenth-century "How Excellent" is a vibrant representation of God's grace and power but falls within this trounced music category in some churches for lacking innovation and overuse.

APPLICABLE LESSONS FROM BACH'S CHORAL EXPERIENCE FOR MODERN CHURCH MUSIC LEADERS

Biblio-Cultural Fidelity:

The significance of church music in worship without the attendant requirement of fidelity prompted John Witvliet's inquiry on how church music can be selfless,

collaborate and interrelate with congregational life. Witviliet's inquest calls for a re-examination of the gap between J. S. Bach's experience as a liturgical musician and the present-day church musicians in the mainline evangelic churches. One problem to tackle is the types of church music that fit the liturgical experience. To this, Witviliet opines that: "any musical culture whatsoever has two sides to it: the objective and the subjective. The objective side consists of the works available for performance within that culture; the subjective side consists of the habits acquired for listening to the music performed" (Witviliet, 2006:15).

Therefore, it is evident that cultural factors in the way church music is perceived vary. So, present-day Nigerian church music's religious and social environment has also changed considerably. In Bach's time, the musical materials employed were familiar primarily to his environment, highlighting the atmosphere in which Bach ministered. "The church was the nursery of musical culture, and this culture was in no sense artificial or borrowed. It was based on types long known and beloved by the common people as their peculiar national inheritance and associated with much that was stirring and honourable in their history" (Dickinson, 1902:285). This apparent shift in Bach's time and now, calls for a balance of cultural trends and biblical authority.

J. S. Bach developed and promoted a musical culture already inherent in his nation. The same can be said of church music composers today, but this time, much of what is out is stripped of its biblical, spiritual and cultural character, partly due to misuse of digital technology and the propensity to borrow ‘hook, line and sinker’ from unknown sources. Also, church music today has witnessed major conflicts concerning taste and use in worship. This confusion is due to the evolving digital modern society's many extraneous introductions to the church. However, a possible solutions relates to how a music minister sees or church pastors view liturgical music, either from the aesthetic or pragmatic angles. That is, the technicalities, and the biblicality of its role in worship, and juxtaposed with what is standard for the ministry, in this case, the church.

Scholars see this conflict as interrelated with worship disparities, differing traditions and preferences. Marva Dawn (2003:7) highlights the 'traditional' and the

'contemporary' side of contending issues. She called it "a particular pair that has caused conflicts noticeable in many eras: the position of objective and subjective, expressions of truth about God and feelings in response to God." As a way of forging a path, she counsels that the church should make the necessary inquest and arrange a situation where the use of music in the church reflects biblical, spiritual and doctrinal truth. In dealing with the issue of bringing the pair together, "it is essential that worship music – as well as all the other formative elements of our congregational life continuously holds in tension the opposite necessities of both Spiritual and truth" (Dawn, 8).

What she called 'tension' is inherent in Bach's choral works for the church, as one of the noticeable features was his ability to borrow or improvise contemporary elements in his choral music. He did this while maintaining fidelity to the liturgy in lyrical content and musical character appropriate for the sacred setting of the church. This feature furnishes present-day church musicians with the needed model for re-orientation.

As good as this marriage of musical elements can be, it is also a source of another problem that has to do with inculturation. Secularisation, or the doctrine of relativism as it is known, has left the church's music with no clear-cut demarcation between liturgical music and entertainment music. Without this distinction, church music could lose its biblical and spiritual essence as a liturgical art. The churches in Nigeria can be full of music with a semblance of religion but lacking in character. Isaac Udoh (2004: 170-171) noted that protagonists in the battle of church music are within and without. Church music is the ceaseless struggle between artistic inspiration and ecclesiastical authority from the earliest to the present day. Church music is distorted and under attack from the inside and the outside.

Balance of Spiritual Sanctity and Trending Styles

It appears that at a point, church musicians in Nigeria, unlike the dogged faith of Bach in the service of the church liturgy, have abandoned the trip to the Promised Land for the onions of Egypt. Sometimes, the problem is the desire to foist artistic creations on the church. At other times, the high-handed control of the church leaders

failed to embrace the ideas where necessary. Udoh while citing Kurt Stone, underlines that the twentieth century should be noted for violently eroding the traditional values of church music.

Many church music compositions today appear vague and short of liturgical expectations. Music in the church is mainly devoid of holiness, solemnity, and the ministerial elements have been seriously canvassed and are much to be concerned about (Ibid). The proliferation of short and no biblical traits and catchy melodious choruses have also been fingered. Most importantly is Udoh's call on the church to stand up against what he called secular-semi church music to institute control. If the call for music control is anything to go by, one area will be the sources of church music inspiration.

Idamoyibo (2011) highlights various sources of inspiration for the composer, including his/her social, cultural and religious environment. Again, these notwithstanding, what is needed is a typical discerning spirit. Where this discerment is lacking, and churches are not able to control the social-cultural background of these sources, it highlights the need to be careful in ensuring that the product fits the character of the biblical text they convey. This is because the writer believes that church music should serve as an art instrument for sacred worship. Foluke Adesina (1996:2) points out that music, as an accessory toward worship, teaches the fine points of Christian dogma to edify and enhance the faith of Christians. In Adesina's view, church music should bear the sacred teachings of the church by being an excellent help to the worship of the church.

Church Music as the Educator in Liturgy

The preceding reflects how church music plays its educative role in worship. It is noteworthy that early Christianity emphasised the teaching and celebration of the faith it professes. Larry Hurtado (1999:9), in the introduction of his book, *At the Origins of Christian Worship,* hinted that early Christianity centred its activities on practices, devotion and teaching of its liturgy. Along with the preaching, its devotional practices sought to deepen the faith and orient its devotees. Music is an art

instrument meant to serve this basic need. This understanding of the liturgy and music should reflect in the liturgical services for which a musician provides music.

Liturgically, as prescribed by the church, the church structure is patterned according to accepted biblical beliefs. In a way, the themes that music often reflect are largely pre-determined. The demand for teaching the worship culture of the Christian church necessitated the hectic nature of the church year known as the liturgical calendar. It was said that the demand for suitable songs in the Lutheran church far exceeded the supply; thus, Luther himself wrote some chorale texts and chorale melodies (Grout and Palisca, 1996:240). Historically, "throughout the seventeenth century, Lutheran compositions' text was chiefly drawn from the Bible or church liturgy, together with verses taken from or modelled on chorales (hymns). Neumeister added poetry that dwelt on the day's scriptural reading and brought its meaning home to the individual worshiper through devout meditations" (Grout and Palisca, 354).

Church Music as a Reflector of Reality and Hope

Worshipers in the churches are as much affected by the social crisis around them. This attempt to pretend to isolate the church from realities outside her often leaves more damage than envisaged. During a period in protestant Germany, the seventeenth century was recovering from the thirty-year war. A period in which Bach's liturgical musical works became a rallying point for national identity in times of national crisis. "Despite political disunity, the following generations enjoyed a mighty resurgence; most notably through the music of Johann Sebastian Bach" (Grout and Palisca, 270). Bach drew from the hopes and aspirations of the people in setting the sacred gospel narratives of the Bible to liturgical music.

Church music has generated a large body of literature. Many of these are concerned about terminologies, styles, perception and acceptability in the public domain rather than their suitability in biblical corporate worship. A brief reflection on the definition of church music narrows into its roles in the liturgy for the church's dogma. Joncas (2005:48) explains that such a definition would influence pastoral practice.

Although reflecting on this range of terminology might seem esoteric and arcane, it actually has implications for pastoral practice. 'Religious music' properly refers to

any repertoire explicitly generated by a particular religious tradition… This stands in contrast to 'sacred music' which may explicitly or implicitly… deal with religious issues from any or no denominational perspectives. ‘Church music' refers specifically to Christian music, but is not limited to Christian music employed in worship; church music may also be used in witness or catechetics.

The choral works of J. S. Bach in the Lutheran liturgy fit this narrower definition. Bach drew from the Bible narratives, which highlight the liturgical drama of the church of his days. It, therefore, behoves this generation of Nigerian church musicians to do the same.

CONCLUSION

The paper underlined the essence of biblical narrations in music compositions. The writer attempted to draw from Bach's choral works, a close affinity with the Holy Scripture, especially so in the liturgical pieces which he composed and personally performed during church worship and his ministry as a composer and performer in the service of the Town Council of Leipzig and St. Thomas Kirche. The effect can be seen in Mermikides (2021) that "connections to the divine are never far off, as in Mauricio Kagel's quip that no one believes in God anymore but everyone believes in Bach, or even – in the words of a contemporary atheist philosopher – that Bach is the best argument for the existence of God." Music has the power to illuminate, and composing music for God's worship is a duty in need of transcendental but biblically guided resources and not only a resort to human experience and inspiration.

The church and its leadership should do more to provide the needed attention regarding church music projects as building for the next generation of biblically inclined Christian worshipers and the posterity of Nigerian Christianity. Volunteer music services should be an exception and no longer the norm. A church's music ministry is an arm of the pastorate and should be financially maintained to make the creative infusion of Bible and music language, devoid of the world, possible.

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